

JOHN MURTHA

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 29th ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Op-Ed

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Rep. Murtha on Education Reforms in Budget Proposal

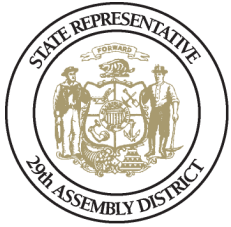
Over the past days and weeks, my office has received calls from constituents across the 29th Assembly district regarding public K-12 funding in the budget. I would like to update you all on what was proposed by the governor, and what has since happened through negotiations in the Joint Finance Committee.

When Governor Walker released his budget proposal in February, he included provisions that would reduce per pupil funding by \$150 in the first year of the budget biennium for public K-12 education. In the second year of the biennium, he proposed to restore that \$150 per-pupil and include a slight increase. In other words, he proposed a cut in the first year and a slight increase in the second.

Since February, the Joint Finance Committee as well as individual legislators held listening sessions across the state. A common theme at every session was that parents and school administrators were not comfortable with the \$150 per pupil cut in the first year. The argument is that the cut in the first year would force districts to make very tough decisions that may be irreversible even with the slight increase in the second year. After hearing from the public, Republicans in the Assembly and Senate agreed we needed to restore the \$150 per pupil.

In May, the Republican-controlled Joint Finance Committee voted to restore the \$150 per pupil in the first year of the budget biennium. In the second year, the committee voted to increase funding to \$250 per pupil. More simply stated, the committee rejected the governor's proposed cuts, and voted to increase K-12 per pupil funding. The final budget bill will include the committee's changes. We will not be cutting public K-12 education. Each and every cent of the nearly \$200 million the legislature restored will be going to public education. There is a separate and much smaller funding source for the school choice program. Because of the many moving parts of this budget, it is easy to conflate the numbers to make it seem like the legislature is robbing Peter to pay Paul. As I hope to show below, this is simply not true.

The nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau released a study on April 22nd regarding the school choice program. If we were to eliminate the voucher program, even after all the money we spend on that program was appropriated for general school aids, every school district in the 29th Assembly District would lose funding. St. Croix Central would lose over \$91,000 per year; Baldwin-Woodville would lose over \$92,000; New Richmond would lose over \$260,000; Menomonie would lose over \$263,000. This is due to the fact that so many students would return to the Milwaukee Public School District. In other words, current dollars would have to be redistributed to properly fund what would be a much larger Milwaukee Public School District. That redistribution of dollars would negatively impact school districts in the 29th Assembly District.



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The school choice decisions in the budget are good for the state as a whole. They will have little to no effect on the people I represent, other than the savings I documented above. Over the course of the next 10 years, Wisconsin's aggregate budget is in the neighborhood of \$70 billion. The state will spend an incredible portion of that money on state public school expenditures: \$46 billion. Wisconsin's investment in school choice is less than 2% of what it will spend on public schools, and less than 1% of total public education spending.

There is an income cap in place for statewide enrollment in the program that will not be changing. A family is only eligible for a school choice voucher if their income is less than 185% of the federal poverty level. For a family of four, this is \$44,177. For the first ten years, there is also a restrictive cap based on participation in each school district. But, even if that cap were not there, this would be less than a drop in the bucket for Western Wisconsin. In the tens of thousands of square miles west of the Wisconsin River, there are currently four programs that participate in school choice, with 211 total students participating. This will not siphon away any funding from our school districts. We have fully restored any cuts to public education and the data proves that school choice means there is more money available for schools in Western Wisconsin. We are trying to give struggling families, especially in large cities, an opportunity to succeed.

Another topic of discussion has been the new teacher licensure options that the Joint Finance Committee has added to the budget. The idea for this new option came from last session's Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools, a bipartisan committee tasked with investigating issues faced by rural schools across the state. One suggestion from that task force was a teacher licensure option for non-core classes, in order to remain competitive with options available for urban school districts. Rural school administrators claimed they were having a hard time finding individuals to teach classes such as auto-mechanics, wood shop, accounting, and other non-core classes. What this new licensure option allows districts to do is hire a local auto-mechanic to teach mechanics, a local carpenter to teach woodshop, or a local CPA to teach accounting.

First and foremost, this is an option that a school board and school administrators can choose to take advantage of. If this will not work for a school district, they will not use it. Second, this license will be restricted to the needs of the district - it will be non-transferrable. Third, we understand that knowledge of the subject material and knowledge of instruction are two different things. Therefore, we have required the Department of Public Instruction to make informational material available for potential teachers to take advantage of. This levels the playing field between poorer school districts and wealthier, more urban school districts. And, again, if this does not work for schools in the 29th District, as decided by the school board and superintendent, then they do not need to pursue this option any further.

These recent actions in the Joint Finance Committee show the commitment from legislative Republicans to do what is best for our students. Through restoring public K-12 funding, offering options for parents, and developing a way for rural kids to be exposed to more non-core classes, we recognize the vital need to put our kids first. I'm proud of our commitment and I look forward to finding more innovative ways to make our schools and our students some of the best in the country.

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